

Wading River Congregational Church

SERMONS IN PRINT

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EASTER SUNDAY



1 Corinthians 15 *"I Believe in the Resurrection"*

"I believe in the resurrection of the dead." That is what Christians believe. We said so this morning. As Casey Stengel may or may not have said, "You can look it up" – it's in the Apostles' Creed!

But what does it mean to say "I believe in the resurrection of the dead"? What did it mean to those who first said it, and what does it mean to say it now? (Even the question "what does it mean" is of course nicely ambiguous – it depends on what you understand by "mean"!). We will look at several things that we mean – or should mean – when we say "I believe in the resurrection of the dead."

1) *Jesus Rose From The Dead At Easter*

Firstly, it's a statement about *history*. When we say it on Easter Sunday, we mean that we believe Jesus rose bodily from death. We do not mean that after he died he "went to heaven" to be with God, or that "he was exalted to the right hand of God." We do not mean that even after his crucifixion "his followers had a strong sense that his spirit was still among them."

We do not mean that if his bones were to turn up in an 1st C. ossuary box, nothing about Christianity would be changed. We do not mean that Christians a generation later were so impacted by his life and teaching

that they invented stories about his reappearing after his crucifixion.

As historians who have studied the beliefs of Jews and pagans in the 1st C. have shown, nobody then would have taken the word "resurrection" to mean anything other than that a person who was dead had come to life again. Most Jews looked forward to "the resurrection" in the belief that God of Israel would never forsake them, and one day would raise his faithful ones to a new life – especially martyrs for their faith like the Maccabees. Most Jews believed that one day God would vindicate Israel and rule the nations from Jerusalem as their king. That was what most Jews hoped for.

That was what the word "resurrection" *meant* – a new bodily existence – even if you *didn't* believe in it, like the Sadducees or the pagans of the Greco-Roman world. They believed in something else: "the immortality of the soul" – a "life of the spirit" when it was released from "the prison" of the body.

But what the Christians believed was that the Jewish expectation of "the resurrection" had come true, already, in time and space, in one case, in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. So the first meaning of "I believe in the resurrection" is that "Jesus was bodily raised from the dead on Easter Sunday."

2) *Christians Will Also Rise*

The second thing that is meant is that Christians will also rise, just as Jesus did. This is a statement about the *future*, and the Christian hope.

Christianity, as one NT scholar has recently emphasized, believes not simply in “life after death” but in “life *after* ‘life after death’” (N.T. Wright). After death, Christians are assured that they will be “with the Lord;” or “with Christ.” “Today you will be with me in Paradise,” Jesus told the thief on the cross next to him. This is what we sometimes call “a better place” – as the Apostle Paul said, “to live is good, but to die and be with Christ is better... and I do not know which I want more...” You can call it “heaven” if you want to.

But in Christian belief, that is *not* the end. The promise of the resurrection of Jesus is that he is the “firstfruits” of the resurrection, and that one day all believers will rise to a new bodily life as he did. That is why, we think, the NT often refers to death as “sleep,” – not because the dead are unconscious, but because they are in a condition from which they can and will be “awoken” to new life. This is the Christian hope, that in God’s good time, a new age, a new heavens and a new earth, will come into being, and believers with transformed bodies will live as humans were meant to live.

They will not only live in the presence of God and enjoy his rule, but they will have bodies that are “imperishable,” “incorruptible,” fitted for the new age in which “there are no more tears, no more death or mourning or crying or pain.” That condition, the NT says, is a “bodily” one – not an era of drifting spirits, but of bodies energized by the Spirit of God – what Paul calls *soma pneumatikos* – “spiritual bodies.” This is a world that is still physical in the way Jesus was physical after his resurrection: able to walk, talk, eat, be touched. He was not, he said to his surprised followers, “a ghost.” He still bore the signs of his earlier life, he was still recognizable, but he was

transformed, and now able to do things he had never done before, like appear and disappear.

“How can this be?”, you ask. Good question. Paul tried to answer it in the 1st C. too. His best analogy was of a seed planted in the ground, which “dies” but then becomes something greater and more wonderful as it grows into a new plant. Even when the molecules that constitute our current bodies have degraded or dispersed, do you think it impossible for God to recreate a suitable body for us? (then remember that the lifetime of most cells in our bodies today is only about 30 days, and we are constantly being remade at the molecular level, while remaining unquestionably “the same people.”).

So our second meaning of “I believe in the resurrection of the dead” is that it expresses the Christian hope for incorruptible bodies in a new age.

3) *Faith Is Real; Sin Is Atoned For*

The third thing to say about this statement is that it is a *theological* claim. It says that faith is real, and that the atoning work which Jesus claimed for his death: “I will give my life as a ransom for many;” “this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins;” - that these claims are vindicated in Jesus’ resurrection. If not, as Paul argues, we are wasting our time. If Jesus is not raised, preaching is worthless, faith is useless, and we are still “in our sins.”

4) *Jesus Is Lord*

The fourth meaning of “the resurrection” is *political* – a fact we often miss. Peter proclaimed that “God raised him from the dead... and has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ.” Paul says Jesus was “declared with power to be the Son of God by his resurrection.”

Even if these statements in the 50s AD fall short of the claim that Jesus was “the pre-

existing second person of the Trinity, incarnate," they at least mean that he was the Messiah of Israel, the expected Davidic King. To say that "Jesus is Lord" is to claim that Caesar is not. To say that Jesus is "the Son of God" directly challenges Tiberius, whom the coins claim is "the son of the divine Augustus."

Those claims made all the difference to the lives of Christians in the 1st and 2nd C., as they accepted that they owed allegiance to a power greater than Caesar's; that the Roman Empire was not as strong or important as the Kingdom of God, and that their loyalty to Jesus as Lord allowed or even called them to disobey Caesar, and to separate themselves from pagan worship and social practices.

5) *Christian Life Is Resurrection Life*

Finally, the statement "I believe in the resurrection" is a *metaphorical* statement about *life now*: it says that all Christians are called to live "the resurrected life" in the present age.

Christians now are called to live as though they had *already* "died with Christ" and "been raised again," as though they were already "dead to sin," but made alive and new in Christ. They were and are called to live in anticipation of the new age that has already begun in Jesus, and to become examples of what "new life in Christ" looks like. As people who are now "born again" in Christ, who now know they are covered under "the forgiveness of sins," who look forward to being transformed, they are to live already as people who have started on the process of being "re-created in the image of Christ."

6) *So?*

Well, you may say, that is all very interesting as NT theology, or whatever it is. But what does that have to do with us, who live in Long Island, NY in 2007?

Let me mention just two of many, many things. First, *death* has once in fact and

forever in principle been conquered. Christians have no reason to fear death. They will go to be "with Christ," until the day they are given "resurrection bodies."

If you think that is irrelevant to life as we live it today, then take a look at our culture. Our attitude to death is one of simultaneous obsession and denial. We glorify death on TV, in movies, and in video games. Our "Top Ten" TV shows are a remarkable excursion into blood and guts, into morgues, into the gruesome activities of medical examiners and police pathologists. We are treated to brilliant graphic reconstructions of bullets tearing through organs, of poisons infiltrating tissues. We are fascinated with death – perhaps we are trying to tame it?

At the same time we live in denial about death. Modern medicine now allows us to defer it longer and longer, and some people just won't "let go." When death happens, our burial practices disguise it with embalming and makeup and flowers. None of us accepts that we are going to die, and at times we fight furiously to keep ourselves or our loved ones "alive."

The combination of obsession and denial is, of course, pathological. In an individual, it would call for psychological evaluation. In a culture, it also means something. It is what the Bible calls "the fear of death." And the Bible also says that in Jesus' rising again, "he freed those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death." Paul says "the last enemy" to be destroyed in the new age is death. When you and I can say, and mean, "I believe in the resurrection of the dead," we can be freed from the fear of death now and live a new and utterly more peaceful life, now.

A second answer to the "so what?" question is this: If there is a new bodily life to come, then everything we do now in this life matters - because what is good in it is going to last. "Be careful," says Paul, "how you construct your life... how you build," because one day there will be a great "inspection," and what has been built with "stones, bricks,

precious stones" will endure; whereas what is built with trash, paper, straw, will be destroyed.

All that is good and right and true and beautiful and just and loving in this life will live forever in the physical, bodily, "new heavens and new earth" that will arrive when the "new Jerusalem comes down out of heaven from God." God plans not to destroy his world, but to purge it. He created it "very good," and one day it will be so again.

The conclusion to draw, says Paul at the end of his great "resurrection" chapter, 1 Corinthians 15, is that "your labor in the Lord is not in vain." Nothing you do here "in Christ" is wasted. Oh, to be sure, "be careful how you build," but do not think you are wasting your time. "If I knew Christ would return in glory tomorrow," said Martin Luther, "I would still plant a tree today."

So "believe in the resurrection of the dead" – Christians do – and learn from that *at least* that you do not need to fear death, and that you will lose everything and everyone you hold dear, because new life awaits you; and remember that every good thing you do in this world in the name of Jesus Christ will last forever, and give him glory and you and others pleasure in the ages to come.

Let us pray...